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Dangerous heights:

Israel's ascent on the escalation ladder

While Israel continues its military escalations with limited options and increasing risk, the Axis of Resistance remains strategically low on the 'escalation ladder,' waiting for the moment when the enemy's troops and munitions near exhaustion.



(Photo Credit: The Cradle)

Following Hezbollah's recent rocket and drone [reprisal](#), which successfully targeted Israel's Gilot military intelligence facility "Aman" and the Ein Shemer site used for aerial monitoring and air defense, the other members of West Asia's Axis of Resistance now face a range of strategic choices regarding their next steps.

Iran has consistently asserted, through its diplomats and high-ranking officials, that a retaliatory response is inevitable. The message from Tehran is clear: a reaction is forthcoming, and it is only a matter of time.

Meanwhile, Yemen is also contemplating its response to the massive Israeli strikes on its main port of [Hodeidah](#). This attack, seen as a disproportionate use of force aimed at inflicting harm on Yemeni civilians and infrastructure, has further galvanized [Sanaa's resolve](#) against the occupation state.

Stepping up escalations

These [anticipated responses](#) from the Resistance Axis are influenced by various factors beyond the conventions of military deterrence and existing strategic balances. Central to their strategy is the objective of halting the ongoing war on Gaza, a goal all Axis state and non-state actors have prioritized since the launch of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood almost a year ago.

The region-wide war in West Asia – and the potential responses of each party to the conflict – is best understood through an “[escalation ladder](#),” a conceptual tool that illustrates readiness and capacity for further military engagement.

Israel: Near the top of the ladder

The occupation state is currently positioned near the top of the escalation ladder. Its high placement reflects almost 11 months of [extensive use of military assets](#), including a range of offensive and defensive munitions, tanks, ground troops, and missile systems.

Barring its nuclear stockpiles, Israel has used nearly its entire arsenal across multiple theaters, indicating a high level of military commitment and operational intensity. This leaves Israel with little room for further escalation without resorting to more drastic measures, such as full-scale invasions or the deployment of strategic weapons.

Despite Israel's substantial military capabilities, its reliance on external support was evident during Iran's limited retaliatory strikes during [Operation True Promise](#) in April. Israel was forced to summon a western coalition and use the airspace of allied Arab states to intercept Iranian projectiles.

This reliance raises questions about the occupation military's autonomy and ability to sustain operations independently. The [economic cost](#) of these operations, reportedly reaching billions of dollars for both Israel and its allies, also illustrates the resource strain of prolonged engagement.

Iran: Careful steps on the first rungs

Iran occupies a much lower rung on the escalation ladder, reflecting Tehran's restrained, yet calculated approach to direct military engagement with Israel. The Islamic Republic has made one limited confrontation to date, in which it primarily used relatively [basic](#) missile systems like the [Emad](#) and [Rezvan](#) ballistic missiles.

It has the capacity to deploy more advanced weaponry, like the [Kheibar-Shekan](#) missiles, designed to penetrate advanced missile defense systems.

Following True Promise, which was the response to Israel's bombing of its consulate in Damascus, Iran demonstrated its ability to escalate while exposing limitations in Israeli missile defenses. The operation included direct strikes from its territory, breaking a long-standing strategic barrier. This move has [challenged](#) Israel's military doctrine, which relies heavily on missile interception capabilities and strategic deterrence.

Iran's strategy involves leveraging its vast missile arsenal, including older models and newer, more maneuverable missiles like the Dezful, Haj Qasim, Khorramshahr, and the Fattah 1 and 2 hypersonic missiles.

These advanced missiles pose a significant challenge to Israeli interceptor systems such as the Arrow/Hetz and David's Sling, which may struggle to intercept them effectively. Tehran's cautious positioning on the ladder allows it to maintain strategic flexibility, responding forcefully, if necessary, while avoiding a full-scale war.

None of its modern, sophisticated arsenal was used, the number of drones and missiles used was only in the hundreds, and Iran has not deployed any military personnel in a direct confrontation. Iran's escalation potential, therefore, remains very high.

Hezbollah: Mid-level engagement with strategic reserves

Lebanon's Hezbollah stands around the middle of the escalation ladder. Since 8 October, the Lebanese resistance has declared over 2,000 military operations, targeting Israeli military positions and assets well into its strategic depth. Despite its active engagement, Hezbollah has carefully managed to avoid depleting its resources, using its more sophisticated missile arsenal, or escalating to an all-out war.

While dropping hints at its capabilities, such as its [underground missile facility](#), Imad-4, Hezbollah has not yet deployed its most advanced or secret capabilities developed since the 2006 war, indicating that it retains significant strategic reserves.

Furthermore, unlike the Israeli army's ground forces in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, Hezbollah forces have not been put in direct conflict with the enemy. Reportedly over 100,000 strong – not including the organization's elite corps – and with the ability to call on many hundreds of thousands of regional fighters who have pledged to join any direct battle against Israel, these troops are neither depleted nor exhausted, unlike the enemy forces.

Hezbollah's middle-ground positioning is a balanced approach, keeping pressure on Israel and supporting its allies without exhausting its arsenal and fighting forces or risking all-out war.

Yemen: Strategic posturing at the mid-level

Yemen, like Hezbollah, is positioned midway on the escalation ladder. The Ansarallah-aligned army's involvement has primarily consisted of strategic maneuvers and support operations in and around its territorial waters, rather than direct confrontations – with the notable exception of last month's unprecedented [drone strike on Tel Aviv](#) and similar attacks on the port of [Eilat](#).

Yemen has made use of various missile types, including Quds cruise missiles and ballistic missiles [derived](#) from Iran's Kheibar-Shekan, Emad, and Qiam missiles. These assets enable Yemen to project power across the region despite the technological and military limitations imposed by the Saudi and UAE-led coalition's blockade.

Sanaa's strategic posture is enhanced by its ability to rapidly produce inexpensive munitions and maintain ongoing production capabilities, allowing it to sustain operations without significant escalation. The Yemeni Armed Forces are also ready to step up in [support of Lebanon](#), should Israel decide to escalate further.

Crucially, Yemen's ideological commitment and [tribal social structure](#) provide its political authority with greater freedom to choose targets and execute responses without the same economic concerns or fears of international backlash that might constrain other actors in the Axis.

This flexibility allows Yemen to pursue a more aggressive stance if needed, as evidenced by its potential for launching complex operations aimed at overwhelming enemy defenses, possibly in coordination with Iranian actions.

The only way is down

The current positions of Israel, Iran, Hezbollah, and Yemen on the escalation ladder reflect their strategic calculations and potential actions. Israel's high positioning suggests a limited capacity for further escalation without severe consequences, while Iran's low placement indicates a strategy of restraint, keeping its options open for future engagements.

Hezbollah and Yemen, both at the mid-level, demonstrate a calculated approach to maintaining their involvement without exhausting their resources or escalating the conflict to an uncontrollable level.

The possibility of escalation from [Iraqi resistance factions](#) or even the Syrian army following repeated violations adds another layer of risk that Israel must contend with.

The occupation state's continued escalation without a clear endgame and an understanding of its [own limitations](#), coupled with growing US reluctance to intervene, could ultimately lead to a strategic overreach and outright defeat in a full-on regional war.

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